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ABSTRACT

Because of increased competition and a need for retaining and retraining valued employee in a shrinking industrial labor pool, there is a growing need for presentation skills training. Analysis of theories of adult learning, training styles, training formats, and practical experience in the field suggests that the most effective training format for presentation skills training is individualized, private coaching sessions held over a several month period, rather than group seminars held by large training firms. One of several models that has proved effective begins with a brief group session during which an overview of presentation skills and the format of individual sessions are given. Participants then schedule private 90-minute sessions with the instructor over a 2 to 3 month period. In each session the trainee delivers a brief prepared business presentation which is videotaped and evaluated. This approach is more effective than large group sessions because learning is active and there is a direct correlation to the working world. The effectiveness of this approach can be measured in several ways: the improved attitude and confidence level of participants, increased sales or clients, subsequent training sessions, and individuals who seek additional opportunities to give public presentations. In the 1990s, the need for presentation skills training will only grow and require more trainers to enter the field. Business will spend money to train valued employees because it is less costly, in the final analysis, than to hire new recruits. Companies are beginning to believe that those with superior communication skills rather than technological skills will be the companies on the cutting edge. (PRA)

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Communication in Corporate Settings: Trends for the 21st Century

The Effect of Presentation Skills Training

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a paper delivered at

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There Is a Tremendous Need for Presentation Skills Training

Corporate executives are feeling the squeeze from both sides. As corporate America scales down its staffing needs, competition within the company becomes more intense. Those with polish, poise, political savvy, and strong presentation skills advance to the head of the line. Strong presentation skills are even more crucial as executives feel the pressure to sell additional products and services to existing clients or reach new ones. Few executives would dream of failing to remain abreast of trends and developments in their profession. More and more, executives are realizing the need to improve non-technical skills as well. Presentation skills training can offer them an opportunity to improve job skills and stay ahead not only of their competitors but also their own colleagues.

What Type of Training is Effective? How Do We Measure Effectiveness?

It is often difficult to determine the effect of any training program, especially after time has elapsed. The formal evaluation sheet most participants are asked to complete at the conclusion of the training seminar is only a piece of the puzzle. Immediately after the training, most trainees are on "a high" for a variety of reasons: they had a few days out of the office at company expense, they were "on their own" in a strange city or corporate center, they were able to get out of the business suits for a few days, or they actually feel good about what they learned or did. It's difficult to tell just what they "key" into. And we are also aware of the "Hawthorne effect." But what about the long-term -- when they return to the workplace? Trainees either implement new skills and knowledge directly upon return to the workplace, make a halfhearted attempt, or fail to display any new behaviors or skills at all. Without a way to assess skill enhancement, especially after time passes, employers

may look askance at training programs as a waste of time and money.

Economic conditions often call for staff cut-backs and training departments are traditionally among the first to go. So when in-house training is no longer an option, outside firms and consultants fill the need. Let's look at the presentation skills training approach of large training firms.

Most often, generic presentation skills training sessions are offered for one or two days to groups of fifteen to twenty. Usually the format used by large training companies is the same: general workshops addressing the use of the body, the voice, stagefright, patterns of organization, and the like, followed by a brief presentation by the participant on an innocuous topic like, "What I like about my job" or "Quality time spent with my children." Feedback about the quality of the presentation skills is offered by the trainers. Videotaping is often a part of the process and participants are given a reference manual to take back to the work-place. Companies are usually charged $1,000 per participant for this group program.

This type of training format has limited effectiveness for several reasons. Studies of adult learners continually tell us that real change only takes place when learners are highly motivated and see extrinsic rewards (a direct application to job performance or career enhancement) or intrinsic rewards (personal satisfaction) as the result of full participation in the training process. Not only are the topics they are asked to speak about in most generic training programs viewed by trainees as of little worth, the few minutes of feedback from the trainer is hardly worth sitting through two days of general instruction covering information many indicated they already knew.

Training that is offered on-site and tailored to meet the specific needs of staff members is often much more effective for a variety of reasons. Conducted not in a two-day group seminar but in individual sessions over an extended period of time, training makes a quantifiable difference in the quality of presentation skills.

I have developed a model of presentation skills training that has proven effective for a variety of clients, though all training programs vary somewhat. Training begins with a brief group session during which an overview of presentation skills and the format of the individual sessions are given. Participants then schedule to meet with me privately for a series of 90-minute sessions over a two-to-three month period. Each session is structured the same: the trainee delivers a prepared business presentation of approximately fifteen minutes. Business presentations might include a sales pitch to a potential customer, a report to an audit committee, a proposal for additional client services, or a report to management. The presentation is videotaped and viewed by both the participant and myself. After feedback, the presentation is made a second time. The same presentation may be given during a second session and then a new one is prepared for subsequent sessions.

For many busy executives, this is the only format in which they **could** receive training - they are too valuable to be taken out of commission for a two-to-three day group seminar, interrupting service to their own clients. They see a "bottom-line" approach to personalized training, which directly responds to their needs rather than a group session which plows through basics for everyone without specificity. The time is compressed, the activities streamlined, the material more personally relevant and the result more evident.

The value of this format is that the participant is actively involved in the process, not

a passive listener. The activity has a direct relationship to "real life," the presentations are those he or she is preparing to make to an actual client or has just completed and are similar to those he or she is likely to make again. All of this underscores what we believe to be true about adult training - that real change only happens over time and with numerous opportunities for them to try out new skills and techniques.

What I find most rewarding is the occasion when an earlier participant stops by the training room to tell me how well he or she did in a presentation to a client or a new trainee tells me of an earlier participant's success in making presentations and that they had recommended the training program.

Training effectiveness can be measured in other ways. For one client, I have been asked to develop a training program using laptop computers, projection equipment, and presentation graphics for the benefit of the early trainees who wish to keep improving their skills. As high-tech presentations become the benchmark of the future, these participants want to remain competitive in the field.

I have conducted six sets of training seminars for one of the "Big Six" accounting firms which has made a strong commitment to presentation skills training for managers, senior managers, and partners in the consulting division. As accounting firms have had to merge in order to stay competitive, they have also realized that much of a firm's revenue will be generated from the additional services conducted either in conjunction with or in addition to the annual audit. Consulting services have thus become a critical part of the firm's overall strategy. Partners with whom I have interacted report stronger presentations made by trained staff members, increased confidence and a positive attitude toward client

presentations, and a willingness to not only recommend the training to others but also to continue their own training with follow-up sessions. One senior manager with whom I worked related that during his three-hour presentation to American Express for their Pacific Rim territory business he thought about the work we had done together in coaching sessions and tried to monitor his delivery as well as the content. He felt that a large part of the reason American Express selected his firm for the engagement was his polished presentation. This firm measures the success of the training program by increased client load as a result of their confident staff presentations. I measure success by being asked to deliver the same training programs to additional regional offices.

It's happening in a variety of industries. Over 4000 engineers, supervisors, managers, and sales representatives of the leading laser printer manufacturer have gone through communication training sessions. Graduates of the training give noticeably improved internal and external technical presentations according to their supervisors. Others cite increased confidence, improved quality of presentations, increased sales and improved customer relations.

The publisher, editor-in-chief, and director of marketing of the largest computer magazine recently went through individualized training. They needed to learn to move from the heavy jargon of the computer world into the mainstream of public audiences as they tour the country with their monthly seminars. They cite increased confidence, smoother public presentations, and a willingness to tackle the new challenges of media appearances.

Changing Corporate Attitudes - A Case Study

For the past three years, I have worked with the national training office of a second

"Big Six" accounting firm. Each summer, the firm conducts two-week training seminars on accounting principles and practices for its younger middle managers from around the country. The first year, I simply inherited the presentation skills segment of a larger two-week seminar on Advanced Auditing Procedures which consisted of a two-hour block of presentation basics. Previously, this section was simply assigned to whichever accountant/trainer was available for that block of time. The next day, seminar participants were expected to deliver a team presentation to management incorporating those presentation basics. Needless to say, a short dose of presentation skills was virtually lost on a group scrambling to put together the content of a presentation overnight.

I offered to rewrite the module and to revamp the schedule for the next summer's seminar. My revisions included the placement of the presentation skills workshop earlier in the seminar, a videotaped run-through with the group, and feedback about their performance. I offered to be available for private coaching, and attend final group presentations and to provide group and individual feedback.

This revision was adopted and implemented. Not only did the level of group proficiency increase but seminar participants actively sought out opportunities to work with me on an individual basis and address deficiencies they wished to eliminate. Feedback from accounting firm partners who watched the team presentations indicated that presentation skills were greatly improved from previous years.

I have just finished revising the seminar again for next year. The firm asked me to build into the two-week schedule, time for individual, 60-minute coaching sessions in addition to the group workshop and group feedback sessions. The presentation skills portion

of the seminar will now include a two-hour workshop, group presentation run through, required individual videotaped coaching sessions, and a final group presentation with feedback from me. In three years, the presentation skills training portion of the seminar has quadrupled in the amount of time allotted to it and moved from a group to an individual focus. This is especially of note in that the total number of days for the entire seminar has been shortened from 14 to 10 days. This firm's commitment to improving instruction and increasing individualized presentation skills training continues even after a merger with another "Big Six" with a national training office of its own.

This same pattern of increased individualized training emerged with the firm's train-the-trainer seminar. The first year, I was asked to simply speak to the firm's instructors for fifteen minutes, explain the presentation skills training portion of the seminar that I would deliver, and underscore the need for strong presentation skills as they, as trainers, moved through accounting principles and practices. The second year, I built into this seminar a workshop not only on platform presentation skills but also material on the adult learner and immediacy in the training setting. Also included were two videotaped coaching sessions with each instructor. Before and after performances were hard to argue with and trainers indicated that they felt better equipped to convey technical information to participants.

Where Are We Headed?

Where will presentation skills training be throughout the rest of this decade? I believe that the need for communication and, especially presentation skills, training will grow stronger and require more trainers to enter the field. As the pool of qualified candidates shrinks, it will be even more important to retain and retrain employees who do show promise

or those who have strong skills in a variety of areas and need to bring other skills up to speed. Companies spend thousands of dollars training new employees and upgrading their skills in the first few years of employment, representing a commitment to not only that employee but also to the future of the company. It makes economic sense to keep that employee and offer additional support and training rather than to start from ground zero with a new recruit. The questions then become: what kind of training? how should it be conducted? what should be the effect of that training?

There is a new philosophy driving many companies to decide to train employees in communication skills. They believe that those companies whose employees have superior communication (or "people") skills rather than those with superior technological skills, will be propelled into leadership positions in various industries. Communication skills will be the deciding factor.

One of the most important trends in presentation skills training that has emerged in recent years is the move toward individualized training - the individual executive meets with a trainer who leads him or her through a personalized program designed to address specific needs - much like an exercise physiologist.

Outside consultants are just as qualified and can be retained for less that what it would cost to keep someone on staff. When individualized training is offered on-site, in 60- or 90-minute segments, there is little disruption of the participant's workday. The company does not have to lose a staff member for two to three days when attending a group seminar nor will it have to pay for flight and hotel accommodation for each participant. Those trainers who can offer personalized services for individuals for the same price as others offer

group training will be in demand.

Secondly, there is evidence of greater improvement when the training is personalized and delivered one-to-one. When participants see that a company is willing to offer them personalized training (and pay for it), they take more responsibility for the success of training, they become more active in the training process with improved presentation skills as the result. It is a great deal harder to be a passive participant in one-on-one coaching.

Finally, as America becomes more and more a service economy, those trainers who offer customized programs designed to meet the needs of individual participants and which reflect the challenges in particular industries and professions will have the greatest success.

As innovative technology drives the presentation graphics explosion, a generation which has become accustomed to sophisticated, computer-aided TV and film will expect no less from business presentations. But even though the full color, exploded pie chart of estimated 4th quarter earnings is sent through the external VA monitor port of a 386SX laptop computer and is able to change in front of us as we adjust the figures in the Lotus 1-2-3 spreadsheet that generated the pie chart - someone will need to be trained how to pull that presentation together. I believe that it will be done through personalized training and that that will take us into the next century.

Communication in Corporate Settings: Trends for the 21st Century

The Effect of Presentation Skills Training

Rebecca L. Ray, Ph.D.

There is a growing need for presentation skills training due to increased competition in each industry but also to retain and retrain valued employees in a shrinking labor pool. The task is then to decide how training will be conducted and how can its effectiveness be measured. Based upon an analysis of theories of adult learning, training styles, and training formats, and augmented by practical experience in the field, this author maintains that the most effective training format for presentation skills training is that of individualized, private coaching sessions held over a several month period. This is in direct contrast to the large group seminars held by the large training firms.

This approach is more effective than the large group sessions because learning is active and there is a direct correlation to the working world.

The effectiveness of this approach can be measured in several ways: the improved attitude and confidence level of participants, increased sales or client engagements, subsequent training sessions, and an individual who seeks additional opportunities to give public presentations.

In the 1990's, the need for presentation skills training will only grow and require more trainers to enter the field. Business will spend money to train valued employees because it is less costly, in the final analysis, than to hire new recruits and start from scratch. Companies are beginning to believe that those with superior communication skills rather than technological skills will be the companies on the cutting edge.